



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



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Over the past thirty years, Downtown Lowell has undergone dramatic changes. Revitalization efforts during the 1970s and 1980s have radically changed Downtown Lowell from a center of industry to a true urban village. Major initiatives, such as the Lowell National Historic Park, the Tsongas Arena and the redevelopment of numerous mill buildings, have forever transformed the nature of the Downtown.

The Need for a Plan

Many indicators point to the fact that Downtown Lowell is succeeding. Storefront vacancies are significantly lower than in the past. Crime rates throughout Lowell have dropped dramatically over the past ten years. Many abandoned and “obsolete” Downtown buildings have been rehabilitated and converted into highly productive office and residential spaces. The retail economy is active. The streets and sidewalks are busy with shoppers, workers and students. Downtown is becoming a magnet for artists, young professionals and empty nesters, all of whom are attracted to Downtown Lowell’s rich urban fabric. Downtown Lowell appears to be on the verge of becoming a dynamic, exciting place.

Despite these signs, a number of problems persist and long-standing issues remain unresolved. The physical condition of some buildings has been allowed to deteriorate to such a point that they will require very substantial renovation budgets. At the same time, these owners have put exorbitant price tags on the sale of these buildings, effectively deterring their sale to someone who would be able to undertake such a large amount of work.



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Photo: Higgins & Ross



LOWELL, MASSACHUSETTS

Photo: DPD

A strategic plan is needed that will ensure that revitalization in Downtown Lowell continues. Downtown Lowell stakeholders must build upon past successes without an air of complacency to bring about a true renaissance. The model that drove earlier successes—public-private partnerships based on concepts of economic development and historic preservation—is still relevant today. Downtown Lowell must build on this model to achieve the pinnacle of success.

Downtown Master Plan Study Area

As land and building uses have changed over time, the area perceived as Downtown Lowell has shifted. Today, the traditional retail core of Downtown Lowell is easily identified. Adjacent areas, composed of assorted renovated mills and housing developments have varying levels of connection to this retail core.

For the purposes of analyzing Downtown Lowell, two geographic definitions of Downtown were used throughout the Master Plan process—the Downtown Planning Area and the Downtown Core. The Downtown Planning Area spans an area bounded by the Western Canal to the west, the Merrimack River to the north, the Concord River to the east, and the Pawtucket Canal to Market Street to the south. Within this area, a Downtown Core area was identified and studied in greater detail. This area includes properties located along Merrimack Street from Kearney Square to Arcand Drive, along Middle and Market Street, from Central Street to Dutton Street, along Central Street from Towers Corner to Merrimack Street, and along John, Shattuck and Palmer Street.

The Master Plan Process

In the Spring of 2000, the Lowell City Council and the Downtown Lowell community identified a need to develop comprehensive analysis and plan for Downtown Lowell. From the initiative of the City Council's Downtown Subcommittee, a Master Plan Team was selected from the staff of the Division of Planning and Development (DPD) to develop a strategic plan and vision for the continued redevelopment of Downtown Lowell.

Throughout the process of developing the Downtown Lowell Master Plan, the Master Plan Team has sought to involve the public to develop consensus regarding the important issues and possible solutions to problems facing Downtown Lowell. Four primary means of soliciting public participation were carried out during this planning process, including:

- **City Council Ad-hoc Downtown Improvements Subcommittee** - The public's first point of involvement in the planning process was a series of public meetings hosted by the City Council in the Spring of 2000. Various topics and citizen concerns

were discussed as they relate to Downtown Lowell. Comments from these public meetings were incorporated into this Master Plan.

- **Downtown Lowell Master Plan Community Advisory Committee (CAC)** - A Community Advisory Committee (CAC) was created to oversee the planning process and give direction to the Master Plan Team. The thirty-member CAC was appointed by the City Manager and represented a broad cross section of Downtown Lowell stakeholders, including Downtown businesses, building owners, institutions and residents. Meeting on a monthly basis, the CAC provided insight to Master Plan Team on the history of the Downtown and assisted in the development of the Plan through its completion.
- **Focus Groups** - Specific issues were discussed during separate focus group meetings on a variety of topics that affect Downtown Lowell. These meetings were conducted with relevant stakeholders according to topic. Focus groups met to investigate the issues of traffic, urban design, tourism, commercial development, residential development, and public safety.
- **Surveys** - During the Summer and Fall of 2000, the Division of Planning and Development conducted two surveys—one soliciting input from the existing business community and one focused on the current residential population of Downtown Lowell. These surveys were carried out in order to collect valuable market data and to more accurately determine the needs and desires of these important constituencies.

This broad-based public participation process was used to identify a wide variety of Downtown Lowell issues and needs. In addition, past studies and proposals for the redevelopment of Downtown Lowell were often used throughout the planning process as primary and secondary sources of data for the Master Plan.

A Vision for Downtown Lowell

Based on issues identified through the public participation process, a direction for the future of the Downtown slowly began to form. Further insight was developed through an analysis of existing conditions and an identification of the future trends affecting Downtown Lowell. Utilizing all of these resources, the Downtown Lowell Master Plan CAC established and endorsed the following mission statement and principles to guide the future development of Downtown Lowell:



Photo: Sandra Swaile- DPD



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Photo: Guin Moyle- DPD

“Downtown Lowell is envisioned as a unique, vibrant 24 hour community that provides an attractive, safe and user-friendly environment for people to work, shop, visit and live.”

This Plan seeks to provide a blueprint for transforming Downtown Lowell into a place where all groups of people: workers, shoppers, tourists, students, and residents can create a continuous hub of activity. Downtown Lowell must provide every user with three basic qualities:

1. Downtown Lowell must be physically attractive and void of unkept buildings, trash, graffiti and other unappealing features;
2. Downtown Lowell must be a safe place at all times, especially during evenings and weekends;
3. Downtown Lowell must strive to be interesting and “user friendly,” easy and convenient for these user groups to access on a regular basis

Specific goals for the future of Downtown Lowell were endorsed by the Citizens Advisory Committee, and include the following:

- Utilize the unique cultural heritage, historic tradition and natural resources of Downtown Lowell to generate new economic opportunities and growth in the Downtown.
- Make Downtown Lowell safe and convenient for pedestrians.
- Create new housing opportunities in Downtown Lowell, especially for artists.
- Create an active, clean and safe urban riverfront that creates opportunities for recreation and becomes the spine of the Downtown community.
- Enhance the positive image of and investment in the Downtown.
- Develop cooperation and coordination amongst Downtown groups – particularly in the areas of marketing and maintenance.
- Develop a retail mix attractive to residents and visitors.

The final result of this Master Plan process is a true community-driven plan to guide the future of Downtown Lowell. Any future public and private investments in Downtown Lowell will be based on the shared vision outlined in this Plan.

Downtown Improvement Strategy

As the elements of this plan are laid out, it is important to note certain guiding principles that will direct the approach of this plan:

- **Long-Term Strategies** - The revitalization that Downtown Lowell has experienced has not happened overnight, and it would be unreasonable to perceive that new changes to the Downtown will happen instantaneously. Revitalization will occur by keeping long-term strategies in mind. Continued revitalization of the Downtown will occur over a ten-year period, fulfilling a community-based vision for the Downtown.
- **Multi-Project Approach** - While the Tsongas Arena and the National Historic Park have had a significant impact on the Downtown, neither of these projects alone has been able to completely transform the Downtown. It takes a multifaceted approach, incorporating many key revitalization elements, to allow Downtown Lowell to prosper.
- **Setting Priorities** - This Master Plan does not recommend a reliance on the strong hand of the public sector. If successful, the Downtown's revitalization must continue through partnerships between the public and private sector. In this manner, the public sector will have to prioritize the proposals that it wishes to implement, and those that are better suited for cooperative arrangements or private sector investments. Public investment in the Downtown should be conducted in a manner that will attract private investment and maximize its impact and visibility.
- **Attention to Detail** - Oftentimes, a number of small improvements can yield greater results than one large change. For instance, regular clean up of the alleyways and the addition of hanging flower baskets could incrementally change the experience of Downtown Lowell patrons at a relatively low cost. Similar, low-cost, improvements to details should continually be explored.

A multi-pronged strategy of consistent improvement of each pillar of the Downtown Lowell economic base is encouraged in this Master Plan. Strategies to increase housing opportunities, stabilize and expand the retail economy, enhance the public realm and expand the office market have been explored in this Master Plan.

Downtown Housing Strategy

This Master Plan strives to increase the number of housing units that exist in Downtown Lowell overall, while rebalancing the housing mix to include more market rate units. This



Photo: DPD



THE PHOTOGRAPH ABOVE IS A HISTORIC PHOTOGRAPH OF THE LAWRENCE MANUFACTURING CO. BUILDING IN DOWNTOWN LOWELL. THE BUILDING WAS BUILT IN 1870 AND WAS ONE OF THE LARGEST TEXTILE MANUFACTURING PLANTS IN THE UNITED STATES AT THE TIME.

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Photo: DPD

can be accomplished by analyzing and ranking all existing housing complexes and vacant buildings according to their potential to support market-rate housing, including buildings facing prepayment of expiring use mortgages. The most attractive buildings would be aggressively marketed to developers. In cases where elderly and low-income tenants face eviction, new housing would be created at sites less likely to support market rate development and would require deep subsidies.

Targeted efforts are outlined to support the development of housing for artists, including marketing Lowell to artists, providing grants, creating an art museum and a sustainable arts and culture organization to serve Lowell.

Office/Commercial Strategy

Further office development is assumed to be driven by larger market forces. A strategy to improve the attractiveness of Downtown Lowell for office tenants and developers will focus on reducing the cost of renovation by proposing changes to construction codes to consider the uniqueness of historic structures, increasing the supply of parking and insuring that adequate telecommunications infrastructure is available to all Downtown Lowell buildings. Other efforts to improve the public realm will also improve the attractiveness of Downtown Lowell's stock of office properties.

Public Realm Improvement Strategy

Improvements to the public areas in Downtown will focus on continuing the City's program of renewing the streets and sidewalks. A program of continued investment is recommended for the existing parking garages. A special emphasis on creating stronger linkages between the water's edge and Downtown Lowell is encouraged.

Retail Enhancement Strategy

Enhancement of the retail base of Downtown Lowell will depend largely on the successful creation of new residential and commercial projects. However, opportunities for retail need to be created in order to maintain a critical mass of shops and restaurants necessary to attract those that live close to Downtown Lowell. This can be accomplished by preserving street-level spaces for retail uses and encouraging the inclusion of retail spaces with every new development. Support for retailers can occur through a better management of the short-term parking supply and through improved marketing and promotions.

Circulation Improvement Strategy

Improving the flow of vehicular traffic can occur through the implementation of pedestrian signals, actuation, and emergency preemption at key signalized intersections. Also, efficiencies will be gained through the optimization of timing, provision of coordination settings for the signalized intersections, and improvement of pavement markings and signing. Improving the safety and mobility of pedestrians is also advocated, through the expansion of public transportation options and the enhancements to street crossings.

Downtown Organization and Service Delivery Strategy

The need exists for better coordination among Downtown stakeholders to address increased joint marketing efforts, better event coordination, promotions and maintenance issues that currently no group addresses. Three options for addressing these issues collectively are suggested, including the creation of:

- A Business Improvement District
- A Downtown Task Force supported by a City-funded Downtown Manager.
- A new Downtown Arts & Culture organization that would support the arts community, coordinate events promotion in Downtown Lowell and build links between the arts community, retailers and others.

All three options presume that permanent staff is hired to address issues full-time. The best option will depend on the level of stakeholder interest and willingness to create new partnerships.

Major Development Opportunities

An exciting vision for the continued build-out of Downtown Lowell is presented in this Master Plan. A number of underutilized parcels are investigated for redevelopment potential. Specific development programs are outlined, which seek to weave new physical and social connections between the waterfront and the core of Downtown Lowell. Major development elements include:

Dressing Mills Place

On the parcel between Boott Cotton Mills and River Place Towers, a new parking garage is envisioned, which will include retail and office space staged dramatically on the river's edge. The project would supply parking to support full build out of the Boott Cotton Mills and provide amenities and a new access point to the Merrimack River for pedestrians.



Photo: Sandra Swaile - DPD

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Photo: Sandra Swaile

Sandra Swaile



RENDERING OF PROPOSED DEVELOPMENT AT RIVERWALK NEXT TO TSONGAS ARENA

Photo: Higgins & Ross

Riverplace Center

Two scenarios are proposed for the key parcel abutting the Riverwalk next to the Tsongas Arena. In one scenario the complex is envisioned as a convention hotel with meeting rooms and a practice ice rink to complement the Tsongas Arena. Another scenario suggests a signature, mixed-use office and residential complex. Both scenarios advocate enhancements to improve pedestrian connections between Downtown Lowell and the Riverwalk.

Arcand Marketplace

A medium-sized supermarket with additional structured parking is proposed next to Lowell High School on Arcand Drive. This market would support the strengthened and expanding Downtown Lowell residential neighborhood advocated in this Master Plan.

Moody Street

A new, expanded public safety complex is envisioned along Moody Street next to the current City of Lowell administrative center. New maintenance facilities and office space would be created for the police and fire department headquarters. New parking would be created to better serve City employees at City Hall and the JFK Civic Center. Space vacated in the JFK Civic Center would accommodate other City departments currently scattered throughout the Downtown and the rest of the city.

Market Mills Place

A new parking garage with new retail space is envisioned on the National Historical Park Visitor's Center lot. This development would accommodate the current parking needs of the Visitor's Center as well as the future development of Canal Place III. Retail space created on the ground floor of the facility would provide new shopping opportunities for tourists visiting Lowell's museums.

Massachusetts Mills

The third phase of Massachusetts Mills is envisioned to include 90 apartment units, additional parking and new links to an expanded Riverwalk.

In addition, smaller, infill development programs are presented for both Merrimack Street and John Street. These proposals would reinforce the street edges of these areas and encourage additional activity within Downtown Lowell's traditional retail core.